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ABSTRACT

This paper identifies three basic criteria for good business communications on an international level--clarity, effectiveness, and good will--and presents a model for effective information transfer via electronic media. It argues that electronic mail (e-mail) messages do not meet these criteria even though more and more domestic and international business communication is being conducted exclusively through electronic data transmission. It also points out that there are fundamental differences in the way people examine and react to the same information, depending on whether it is presented on a computer monitor screen or in print media. The paper examines these differences and develops a general set of principles for document design, layout, organization, and structure, to maximize efficient interpersonal information transfer via electronic media. These principles are reduced to a checklist that can be applied to the design and development of electronic business communications. The paper concludes that while most business communicators are aware of the potential impact of the media on their messages, this fact seems to be ignored when they use e-mail and electronic note systems. The application of a few simple design principles and the use of straightforward checklist can have rich potential rewards in developing successful and efficient electronic business communications. (Contains 9 references.) (JLB)

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THE DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT OF ELECTRONIC DOCUMENTS FOR INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

Anyone who has sat before a computer monitor attempting to read the series of E-mail messages or electronic notes that come spewing forth, recognizes that there is something fundamentally wrong with the way the majority of these communications are being presented to the reader. Yet, more and more domestic and international business communication is being conducted exclusively through electronic data transmission.

The paper points out that, in many cases, there are fundamental differences in the way people examine and react to the same information, depending on whether it is presented on a computer monitor screen or in print media. The paper examines these differences, and develops a general set of principles for document design, layout, organization, and structure, to maximize efficient interpersonal information transfer via electronic media. These principles are reduced to a checklist that can be applied to the design and development of electronic business communications.

The paper concludes that while most business communicators are aware of the potential impact of the media on their messages, this fact seems to be ignored when they use electronic media, such as E-mail and electronic notes systems. The application of a few simple design principles, and the use of a straightforward checklist, can have rich potential rewards in developing successful and efficient electronic business communications.

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MESSAGE GOALS

The basic criteria for good business communications on an international level can be briefly described as follows:

1. **Clarity** - The meaning the receiver gets from the communication should be the meaning the sender intended. The communication should be fully understood by the receiver, with no change or loss of meaning from the original conceived by the sender.

2. **Effectiveness** - The communication should achieve the desired results, without requiring further communications. The style, organization, and visual content of the communication should assist the receiver in understanding the communication. The information in the communication should be accurate, and free from errors.

3. **Goodwill** - The communication should achieve continuation of good will between the parties, even if there are points of disagreement within the communication. The communication should present a positive image of the sender and his or her organization.

In addition, according to the basic tenets of business communications (based on psychological realities), every message should be adapted to its intended audience, even if all parties speak the same language. You cannot expect a message to "work" in every instance. The writer must empathize with the audience and personalize the contents in accordance with a reader's special interests.

However, anyone who has sat before a computer monitor and attempted to read the series of E-mail messages or electronic notes that come spewing forth, recognizes that the majority of these communications do not come close to fitting the criteria for good domestic and international business communications. Indeed, the successful, well-formed, readable message seems to be the exception rather than the rule.

Yet, because of efficiencies in cost and speed, more and more domestic and international business communication is being conducted purely through electronic data transmission. This trend is expected to continue and even accelerate in the future. In addition, large numbers of documents originally prepared on paper are being converted to electronic versions for perusal and

storage. For example, many organizations routinely scan resumes into a computer-readable format, so they can be read and reviewed by many different departments simultaneously.

If successful business communication via electronic data transmission is so important, what techniques can be employed to improve message quality?

PRINTED DOCUMENTS VERSUS ELECTRONIC MESSAGES

In information technology, data displayed on the computer screen is called softcopy, while printed output is called hardcopy.

If we are to improve electronic message quality, the first thing we must investigate is how the reader examines, reacts to, and works with information presented as softcopy on a computer monitor screen. The typical monitor screen is restricted to an 80 column, 24 row display for textual information.

Printed information, or hardcopy, has no such restrictions. When examining a printed message, readers can move around the text, gathering and comparing information in novel ways. They can consider and treat information that appears on widely separated, or different pages, and integrate that information to solve a problem or perform a task. In addressing the same problem with electronic messaging information, readers do not have that capability. Therefore, they must either remember the information (or make notes) or the information must be carefully organized and presented on closely related screens.

Readers are also conditioned in the way they expect information to be presented. Word processing, desktop publishing programs, and laser printers have completely altered the way business communications are formatted and printed. Today's business documents rival those produced by professional typesetters. Printed materials have tables of contents, indices, glossaries, typographic cues, page numbers, headers, footers, and the like.

Most electronic messaging systems support only the most rudimentary typographic formatting. Data communications systems for electronic mail, electronic notes systems, and bulletin boards transmit data in ASCII (read as AS-KEY) format, which limits the data display to about 88 printable characters.

Finally, the most significant advantage of printed material is its portability. Printed material can be transported to and from work areas. Electronic messages must be viewed, absorbed, and reacted to at the computer or terminal station.

Because of all these factors, merely converting printed documents to on-line images does not work.

HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR ELECTRONIC BUSINESS MESSAGING

There are a number of heuristics that can be used to aid senders in their development of better electronic messages. First, and foremost, senders must realize that a good business communication is a good business communication, regardless of the media used to sent it.

A fundamental caveat in electronic messaging is that the sender must pay even more attention to detail, and adhere strictly to the principles that govern all good business communications even more than with other types of business communication media. There are several reasons for this warning.

1. Electronic messages can reach their destination almost instantaneously. There is little or no chance to recall them.

2. Electronic messages can be appended, copied, and forwarded, with almost no effort. An electronic message can receive widespread dissemination very rapidly.

3. Electronic messages are inherently insecure. They can be easily read by unintended others, at distant locations.

4. Electronic messages are often logged and archived for easy access. They can be stored for a long time and retrieved, read, and analyzed under conditions and situations far different from those that existed at the time of their original transmission.

In short, despite their apparent informality, an electronic message should not be considered as a "throw-away flimsy" that will disappear after it is read. The message you send so casually today may come back to haunt you at a later date.

Good communicators always focus on the "you-attitude." That is, they should empathize with the receiver and stress reader benefits. The electronic communicator should use the five step approach for message design:

1. **Create clear goals for the Message**. The sender must know exactly what he or she wants to achieve with the message, and must state it directly and straightforwardly, with words low in connotative meaning. That means that the sender must clearly understand what action the receiver is intended to perform as a result of the message, and what impression the message should leave with the receiver.

2. **Simplicity**. A cardinal first rule for successful electronic business communications is "keep the message short and simple." This is often referred to as the KISS (Kept It Short and Simple) principle. Simplicity is a cornerstone of all good communications, but it is imperative for electronic messages.

Specifically, this means use short, meaningful, sentences and simple grammatical structure. The vocabulary should rely on action verbs, and concrete words. Avoid the stiff, legalistic language and complex grammatical constructs that, unfortunately, still characterize too many business correspondences.

As a rule of thumb, try to keep each paragraph within a single screen (about 4 1/2"). Also, with the exception of relevant technical terminology, avoid jargon, and keep the vocabulary in the message at the 8th to 10th grade level. But, never talk down to a communications partner.

3. **Understand Cultural Differences from the Receiver**. With Internet, and its global reach, we must all be sensitive to cultural differences in international communications.

However, ultimately all messages are sent to individuals, and the finished message must reflect your analysis of the person and the situation.

4. **Use Concrete Images**. Wherever applicable, messages should contain data and graphics that bypass language limitations and enhances basic comprehension. Tabular data developed by spreadsheet programs, project scheduling diagrams, bar charts, flowcharts and data flow diagrams can all be transmitted, even with only typewriter graphics, even on text-based communications systems.

5. **Review the Message Before Sending**. The number of electronic messages received with spelling, grammatical, and typographical errors is absolutely appalling. It often seems evident that the sender did not even look at the message before he or she clicked the "send as is" icon.

All business communications should be carefully reviewed before sending, and if needed, revised before they are sent. This is doubly true of electronic messages. Another important point is to try to be aware of any information that can be more readily presented in numeric data or in graphical form, rather than with words.

CHECKLISTS FOR ELECTRONIC MESSAGES

Integrating the basic guidelines for good business communications with the restrictions and limitations of electronic messaging systems allows us to develop a simple, two-part checklist approach that can be used before writing and sending an electronic message:

BEFORE WRITING

1. Is the goal of the message clear in your mind?
2. Do you clearly understand what action you expect the receiver to perform as a result of the message?
3. What impression do you want the message to leave with the receiver?
4. Is there a reply to the message you can request to ensure that the message has been clearly interpreted and that there are no misunderstandings or miscommunications?

BEFORE SENDING

1. Have you read the message and checked for mechanical errors (spelling, typing, and grammar errors).
2. Is there material that can be eliminated from this message?
3. Are paragraphs limited to a single screen?
4. Is related material presented on screens that are close to each other?
5. Is the vocabulary appropriate to the message and the receiver?
6. Are the sentences short and to the point?
7. Does the message contain data? If not, why not?

8. Does the message contain any unprofessional material (personal asides, jokes, external comments, slang, colloquial expressions, buzz words, gossip, innuendo, ...)? If so, eliminate it.
9. Are there any potential cultural factors in the message that could lead to misinterpretations? Eliminate them.
10. Have you asked for a reply or feedback to ensure the message was received, read, and acted upon?

CONCLUSION

Most business communicators are aware of the potential impact of the media on their messages. Unfortunately, this fact seems to be ignored in the use of electronic media, such as E-mail and electronic notes systems. The application of a few simple design principles, and the use of straightforward checklists, can have rich potential rewards in developing successful and efficient electronic business communications.

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